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HOMEMAKERS' CHAT

Saturday, July 9, 1938

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Subject: "HOUSEWIVES' EARNINGS." Information from the Office of Experiment Stations, United States Department of Agriculture.

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The pennies that women put in the family purse make the news today -- the cash that farm homemakers earn. Time was when woman's place was in the home and the man of the family did the earning. Today many women on farms as well as in towns are combining homemaking with outside jobs, or are carrying on home industries to add to the family income.

Through the years arguments have been hot and heavy as to whether married women have a right to work. On this question feeling runs high especially in depression times. Many have argued that married women with husbands to support them are keeping jobs away from men who need the work, and neglecting their homes to earn money for luxuries. In many places married women have been barred from teaching and other public service as well as from private business.

So 2 State experiment stations recently have been getting facts on this problem. Up at the Rhode Island Station and down at the Oklahoma Station they have been finding out how and why farm women earn and how much they make.

Margaret Wittemore and Blanche Kuschke took records of over 600 earning homemakers in one county in Rhode Island. They began collecting facts back in 1929 when the depression had started and there was considerable talk against the married woman who worked. The county where they made this study is a rural section away from large cities, but small textile mills are scattered through the villages within easy reach of housewives on farms. As you might expect, many of the women in the study made their incomes from these mills.

Then, because this county with the ocean and a great bay along two sides is a popular resort section, many others made their incomes from the summer visitors. Some ran tourist homes, lodging and boarding houses, and tea rooms. A good many found work in the spring and fall cleaning and looking after summer homes. One woman reported a good business renting saddle horses and giving riding lessons. Another rented boats and sold bait for fishing. One boarded dogs, 12 ran wayside stands, 5 made ice cream for sale, one sold flowers, 7 sold hand-made rugs and 13 sold homemade food. Beside these, a number were teachers, librarians and nurses, 2 drove school busses and one had been a rural mail carrier for almost 20 years.

It is interesting to note that only 6 of these wage-earning farm women reported an income for strictly agricultural work -- 3 raised turkeys for sale and the others made and sold butter. Of course, many helped with farm work, especially with dairy and poultry products but they received no money directly from this. The investigators remark that in general married women would prefer to continue the sort of work they were doing before marriage or take work of a domestic kind so they rarely keep men out of jobs.

This gives a brief picture of how Rhode Island women earned. The investigators also inquired why they earned and found that most of them worked from necessity. Some had disabled or crippled husbands or some other invalid in the family. Some had husbands out of work. A number were widowed or divorced. Records of how they spent their incomes show that they bought chiefly necessities rather than luxuries. To be sure, a number worked to buy automobiles, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, or other electrical equipment; to make improvements on their homes; or to give their children a better education. But whether these could be called luxuries is a question. As for the charge of neglecting their homes to work, the investigators reported that most of the homes showed better than average care. Though some of the women felt that working was a hardship and a few said their husbands disliked it, the large majority of women as well as their husbands and families seemed not only willing but anxious to continue.

How much did they make? They averaged 17 dollars and 79 cents a week or about 925 dollars a year. The range was from nothing to over 40 dollars a week. As you might expect, those with better training or education usually made more money -- the teachers, librarians or nurses. But tea room managers also did well, averaged as much as 27 dollars a week.

In Oklahoma the picture was somewhat different. Grace Fernandes, Leva Connor and Mattie McCollum visited 163 housewives living on cotton or wheat or diversified farms and reported on their earnings. They concluded that home industries for farm women in Oklahoma were not likely to bring great riches. The average earning was 286 dollars a year or a little over 5 dollars a week. Only 5 women made over a thousand dollars a year while 6 lost a small amount.

In contrast to Rhode Island, the Oklahoma women made their earnings largely in farm enterprises -- chiefly dairy, poultry or garden. The largest number sold cream or made and sold butter. Their earnings ranged from almost nothing to 563 dollars a year. Other women made money from poultry. Those who made a success adhered strictly to business principles and raised purebred stock. Eggs from such stock brought top prices. Some women found the sale of cockerels profitable; other did well on prizes at fairs; some sold baby chicks; others sold broilers and fryers or pressed chicken. Gardening was the third most popular enterprise. Homemakers on diversified farms made the most from selling garden products; those on wheat farms least.

A number of housewives also sold cooked and prepared foods -- cakes, pies, pressed chicken, cottage cheese, cookies and pickles. Those selling at farm women's markets made more than those selling to private individuals. One woman sold 312 angel cakes at market in one year. But success depended on living near a good market. When the depression reached Oklahoma even women who had a market found little sale for their home-prepared food. Other ways of earning money reported by these Oklahoma homemakers were sewing, nursing, teaching, keeping boarders, giving music lessons, picking cotton for wages. As in Rhode Island, necessity was the reason most of these women gave for working.

The investigators comment that married women are at a disadvantage in earning because so often they cannot continue the work they were trained for. And farm housewives are at an added disadvantage because they are isolated. So superior education or training did not mean better earnings. Usually farm products offer the only hope of making money. And each woman must discover for herself which she can produce and sell best and then manage her own production and marketing -- not an easy task along with caring for a home and family. In Oklahoma the only women who made a success of home industries found a paying market and produced a standardized high-quality product regularly so that customers were never disappointed. Even then the returns were not large.

